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Living Past



· ISLAND HOPPING ·

Catalina: Island in a Time Warp

THE HEAT OF THE summer afternoon hangs heavily over Avalon Bay. To the west, the houses terracing the slopes seem to merge in the haze of a sun ready to drop behind the nearby mountain. Along the water, life is astir; restaurants perk up for the evening meal, the yacht crowd clusters astern for cocktails and conversation. Another day on Santa Catalina Island draws to a close.

While sitting near the end of the pier, watching the quiet rhythm of the scene, it occurs to me that in Avalon, the island's only town, the cycle of sunrise stretching into sunset is a more accurate measure of time than anything the calendar can tell us. True, I do see signs of the 1980s: some new condos and apartments encroaching upon the hills; the few full-

sized cars and vans, contemporary enough; and very much in evidence, that delightful post '50s invention—the bikini. But everything else could be straight out of a time warp. Avalon, lying only 26 miles from the dense sprawl of Los Angeles—freeway L.A., where new buildings are razed to make room for newer buildings, where gigantic shopping malls and office complexes seem to rise overnight—this place, for all it has in common with Los Angeles, could be 2,600 miles away.

It dawns on me, there at the end of the pier, that I'm gazing upon an anachronism, as if Avalon had decided to punch its collective clock circa 1931 and stop right there. Who cares if the 20th century speeds by? Certainly not the 2,360 residents of Avalon, who cater to

the summer and weekend crowds, then watch, no doubt with some pleasure, as these groups trundle away to their busy lives, while they, the townspeople, slip back to a quiet, uncluttered routine.

I, too, will soon be one of those climbing into the boat for the ride across the channel to San Pedro; I, too, will be revving up for the fast lanes of Los Angeles. But as I reflect on my long day in town, I might find myself, with just a little imagination, somewhere back in time, Avalon's clock standing still for me, too. 1931? Yes, it could be 1931.

I had started my day along the edge of the bay, at the Casino. Its Moorish, fortress-like exterior evokes the martial spirit of the Middle Ages. But in 1931 it was almost brand new, having opened its doors just two years before. And it wasn't built for war; its theater and ballroom have served happier designs.

On the lower floor, Avalon Theater reminds me of the way theaters used to be



Photographs by F.G. Hochberg

made. This one was built to last. The foyer displays its original couches and carpeting, none the worse for wear. Twenty-two-karat gold leaf graces the ceiling, and inlaid sterling silver ribbons the black walnut paneling and arches. Inside is an array of 1,200 seats, some of them a bit frayed—an understandable condition given the fact that people have been sitting on them for nearly sixty years.

In 1931 I could have gotten in for free, but by the mid-30s management had started to charge admission: 15 cents for regular seats, 25 cents for loge. The theater organ rests next to the stage; made to accompany the silent screen, it is now played only twice a month. The acoustics in the theater are superb—a guide walking down the aisle to the stage speaks softly, and his voice carries easily to the last row of seats.

The mezzanine level, replete with nostalgia, boasts a series of glossy black-and-white pictures of some of the dance bands that played the Casino; how innocent they look with their instruments, their tuxes and the vintage haircuts that the '80s are trying to revive. Somehow even their smiles look pre-World War II. Glenn Miller, the Dorseys, Harry James and Freddie Martin—they all were here.

They played on the top level, on the Casino dance floor, all 20,000 square feet of it cushioned with layers of wood over a cork base, big enough to handle 6,000 people. When not dancing, guests strolled outside along the tile-decked loggia circling the building; from there they looked across the bay or out to sea, and in the beneficence of a starry summer night listened to the strains of love songs wafting through the air.

William Wrigley, Jr., of chewing gum fame, built the Casino some ten years after acquiring a majority interest in the Santa Catalina Island Company, the corporation that owned the island. Recorded history traces Catalina, like so many California sites, back to the voyages of Spanish explorer Juan Cabrillo, who discovered it in 1542. Sixty years later another Spaniard, Sebastián Vizcaíno, named the island Santa Catalina in honor of Saint Catherine. While under Spanish and Mexican rule, Catalina's coves and deep canyons sheltered smugglers dealing in contraband otter skins; later they hid Chinese laborers deported from the United States; and later still, during the Prohibition era, some of the island caves were filled with cases of bootleg liquor awaiting a nighttime run across the channel.

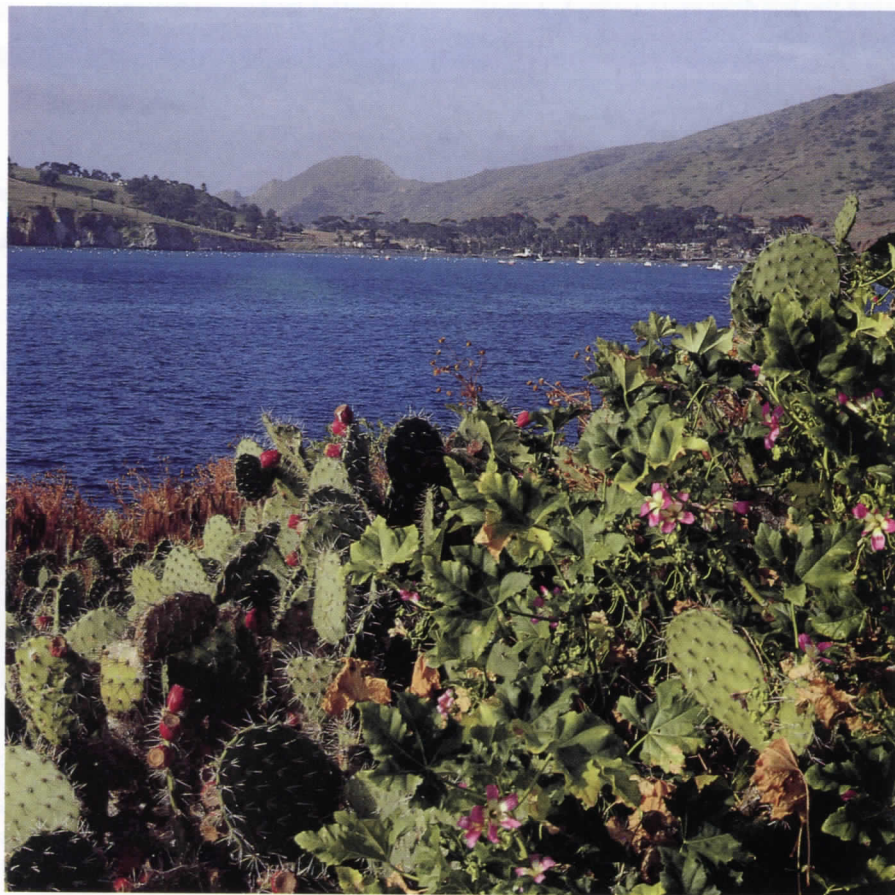
The town of Avalon, named for the mythical island burial place of King Arthur, dates to the 1880s, when owners George Shatto and C.A. Sumner planned its development as a resort. In 1887 they built a four-story hotel, the Metropole, and laid out a number of 20-by-30-foot lots in the "flats," Avalon's small seafront basin surrounded by steep hills to the east and west and by interior slopes to the south. Summer residents leased many of the lots, at first pitching tents there and later building cottages. The cottages, packed in tight, still line those streets, with only a three-foot air space separating them, and a tiny patch of flowers edging up to the sidewalk. Few have been refurbished; the owners seem content to use gallons of fresh paint to preserve their turn-of-the-century flavor.

If the cottages retain their pint-sized charm, other residences reflect a more ambitious architecture—but nothing that 1931 would reject. On the contrary, the Holly Hill House, which pokes its cupola and pinnacled roofs sharply up from the hillside overlooking the east rim of the harbor, is about as Victorian a structure as you will find. Assisted only by a former circus horse, Peter Gano built this remarkable house in 1890. For him it was a labor of love, in this case the love of

SANTA CATALINA



Proximity to Los Angeles has done little to disturb the tranquility of Avalon (opposite). Cactus thrives in Catalina's warm microclimate (right) in this view from Bird Rock.



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a woman about to become his bride. Having completed the house, he awaited her arrival, but she had a change of heart, preferring mainland society over Gano's island entrepreneurship. Alone, the jilted lover lived on in the house, his "No Women Allowed" signs testifying to his bitterness.

High above the Holly Hill House, atop Mount Ada, the Wrigleys built their own version of island splendor in 1921. The site, with its magnificent views of harbor, mountains and sea, was specifically chosen by Mrs. Wrigley because it was the sunniest in Avalon. By Wrigley standards, the house is almost modest; its 22 rooms are spacious enough, but the interiors and wooden floors reflect tasteful simplicity rather than opulence. Perhaps the architect, in providing for generous window space to catch the sunlight and the views, understood that he could construct little inside to match what nature had already created outside.

The six-bedroom Wrigley home today operates as a bed-and-breakfast. Managers had to install ceiling sprinklers and make other unobtrusive modifications to bring the building up to code, but in all the furnishings, including the antiquated metal-grate elevator, I see nothing to intrude upon my 1930s time-warped

Wrigley loved Catalina. Until his death in 1932 he carefully nurtured its development. He and his family brought to the island the accoutrements of his corporate network, including his baseball team, the Chicago Cubs.

Major league teams have always chosen conventionally warm, sunny locales, not too far out of the way, for their spring training. Wrigley, since he owned both the team and the island, decided that the Cubs should train in Catalina. That they did, for 26 seasons (World War II excepted) beginning in 1921. Unlike the spacious spring training plants of other teams, Avalon boasted only one ball field. Its dimensions were standard enough, although club owners had to build a high screen in right field to protect Las Casitas, the adjoining rental cottage complex, from fly balls lofted by Cub batters.

Today the small wooden grandstand is gone and little remains of the ball field. Much of the outfield has been given over to tennis courts, and weeds cover the rest of the playing area, their light brown desiccation serving as an ironic reminder of a colorful past.

Overlooking the old ball field is the first tee of the Santa Catalina Island Golf Course, whose locker room the Cubs

used as training headquarters. Salvador "Silky" Reyes caddied for the ball players, assisted the Cub's trainer and later became golf pro at the course. For 38 years he held that position, retiring in 1985.

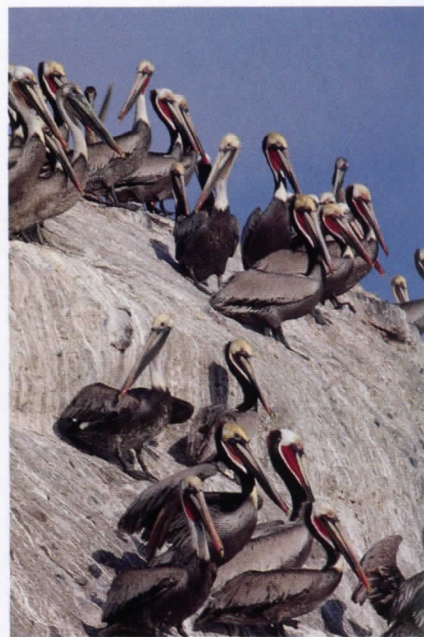
Reyes is a small, trim man whose wrinkled face seems more a reflection of long hours in the sun than a sign of age. He admits to being 75, yet still sports a full head of black hair combed straight back, and his gray sideburns could belong to a man 20 years his junior. Reyes was born in Avalon, and aside from his stint during World War II and brief excursions to the mainland for a Rams football game or a visit with relatives, he has never left the island. He still shoots par—maybe one, two strokes over—and his memory remains as good as his golf game.

"The fire trails, do you see them?"

He points to the bare swaths of dirt that cross the mountains enclosing Avalon. "Years ago the trainer had the players running up and down them, but their legs got so sore, he decided it wasn't a good idea. That was that for the fire trails." His eyes shift down to the ball field, what's left of it. "I saw Hack Wilson of the Cubs hit the longest home run on the island. There was a sign on the outfield screen—'440 feet'—he hit the ball right over that, right over the



Photographs by F.G. Hochberg



Pretty Avalon Bay (left) shelters pleasure craft on their weekend visits from the mainland. Brown pelicans roost peacefully on Bird Rock (above).

screen." The clumps of dry weeds sway a little in the wind, and he comments wistfully, "They used to keep that grass as green as the grass on the fairway – all year long they did."

Reyes displays a plaque presented to him by the golf course for his years of service. He also shows me some eight-by-ten glossies, not of baseball players, but of Hollywood stars: Johnny Weissmuller and Mickey Rooney, striding across the fairways.

"How are you hittin' them?" he asks of cronies at the club. Reyes has to play in a tournament starting at five o'clock, and when he says good-bye his heavy black eyebrows arch a little, his calm exterior otherwise undisturbed. Avalon, I gather, has been good to Silky Reyes; he seems impervious to the vicissitudes of time.

From the golf course it's a short walk down through the flats, past the cottages, to Wrigley Plaza and Avalon's throw-rug of a beach. I stroll by the Tuna Club, its wooden frame extending over the gentle waves. Established in 1898, it's the oldest saltwater fishing club in the world. A forbidding sign reads, "Members Only." Churchill and Chaplin once counted themselves among the elite membership, which is limited to males, 200 of them,

and only those holding tuna catches of a specified weight. The Tuna Club still awaits a challenge from the feminist movement.

Sugar Loaf Point, with its long finger running into the water, rims the western end of Avalon Bay. Just beyond it lies Descanso Bay, much smaller, more sequestered and even quieter. In 1931 the famous Saint Catherine Hotel stood here, its buildings spreading back from the beach. Built in 1918, the Saint Catherine was in its heyday Catalina's pride, a full-fledged resort hotel. With its own pier, sweeping front lawn and tables readied for evening entertainment, the Saint Catherine was for years the haunt of film and society folk. No doubt it survived many an all-night party, but World War II brought pressures of a different sort. Santa Catalina Island was closed to visitors for the duration of the war, and servicemen of the U.S. Merchant Marine took over the Saint Catherine and used it as a training base. The postwar years saw the hotel struggle valiantly to recapture past glories, but the effort was in vain. In 1966, faced with expensive renovations, the building was demolished.

Today, the open spaces covered with

forlorn grass and chipped remainders of masonry walls make one wonder. I can't help but think that the gracious and lovely Saint Catherine should still be here, and that the scruffy scene along Descanso Bay amounts to an unhappy asterisk in Avalon's heralded record of protecting its own.

In contrast, the Zane Grey Pueblo, high on the hill above the Casino, looks as though the western novelist might still be there, tapping away at his typewriter, finishing up one of his 89 published novels. He lived there in 1931, having built the house five years earlier, and except for time spent away on fishing expeditions (Grey was a well-respected member of the Tuna Club), he occupied the house until his death in 1939.

These days the Zane Grey Pueblo serves as a hotel, but the spirit of the old writer lingers. The guest rooms are named after the titles of some of his novels: Purple Sage, Thunder Mountain, Black Mesa, The Vanishing American; and the living-room ceiling still bears the teakwood beams that he brought back with him from Tahiti.

From the patio of the Pueblo, Avalon's rooftops look flimsy, as improvised as they were in that time when Shatto sold

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Above, Hotel Tahara'a, Papeete, Tahiti

Left, Hotel Bora Bora, Nunue, Bora Bora

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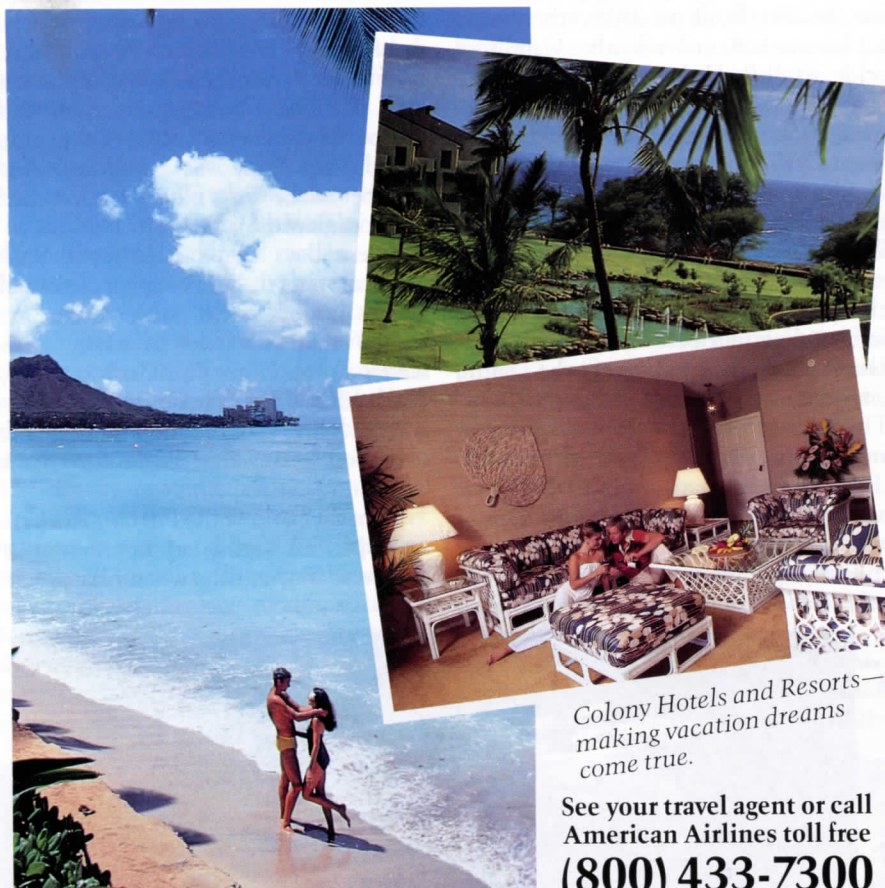
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leases in the hope of luring the summer trade. A good hurricane (unlikely in Southern California), and those wooden frames would be gone in seconds. But a few sturdier shapes—those of Avalon's venerable hotels—also thrust their silhouettes into the late afternoon sky.

I see the Hotel Catalina, built in 1892, a big, royal blue and white aggregate of stories and wings; the Glenmore Plaza, completed in 1891, its light pink and pale green gleaming more softly; the Atwater, circa 1918, where the Cubs stayed; the old Hermosa; and the Island Inn. Many of the hotels lack modern amenities such as color television and in-room telephones, but their sweeping verandas, lace-curtained foyers and slowly turning blade fans more than compensate.

I had time for a short walk before my scheduled seven o'clock departure. One can get around Avalon easily enough on foot, although exploring the surrounding hills requires a rental car. Putt-putts, you might call them—square, four-seat miniatures chugging slowly through the streets. Their antiquated horsepower, if not their design, fits right into island life; in Los Angeles these same vehicles would invite stares and snickers. The limited availability of these little cars, coupled with their sputtering mobility, at least has kept Avalon free from that bane of modern drivers—the stoplight.

Glancing about one last time, I find Avalon lacking in yet another contemporary and rather ubiquitous element—franchises. There are no fast-food places, chain restaurants or markets; they've passed Avalon by for some reason. In their stead, stores like The Sweet Shoppe (Home of the Sugar Bear) and ice cream parlors, waffle houses and mom-and-pop restaurants thrive.

From my perch at the end of the pier I see the boat from San Pedro entering the bay, bringing evening visitors. Maybe some of them, as they wander about the muted opulence of the Casino, past the ramshackle buildings with their dormer windows, cupolas and asphalt-tile roofs, will also gain a sense of another time. Perhaps 1931?

But time capsules, especially imaginary ones, are fickle—they seem to have a mind of their own. Sitting in the boat, watching tiny Avalon Bay recede while anticipating Los Angeles' smoggy skyline, I sense the time warp slipping from my grasp, no doubt heading back to Avalon, where I'm sure it feels more at home.

—WILLIAM C. BRISICK